

Percussion strikes a new note

Contemporary composers are finding fertile partnerships as percussion groups spring up to be the next big thing. KATARINA KROSLAKOVA reports.

During the 1997 Sydney Spring International Festival of New Music, a new percussion sextet sprang onto the contemporary music scene. Its debut program consisted of four world premieres by Australian composers as well as three other Australian premieres, and its performance of the notoriously difficult *East 11th St. NY 10003* by James Dillon won it the award for best ensemble performance that year.

Since its debut, Sprung Percussion has featured in every Sydney Spring Festival; indeed, it epitomises what this festival is about – young, passionate, energetic performers presenting commissioned, unusual or challenging repertoire which leaves the audience nostalgically wishing that they, too, could play percussion.

Founder and artistic director, Guy du Blêt, specifically set out to form a sextet so as to access a wide repertoire, allowing the group to establish its own style. 'One of the main reasons I started the group was because there was a whole bunch of repertoire out there that just wasn't being played. Synergy (another Sydney-based percussion ensemble) has been around for so long as a quartet (originally) and they very much set the standard in the sound for percussion quartets. I thought I'd do something different, as over the years, there have been an inordinate number of groups who've started up as quartets and were trying to do the same pieces the same way as Synergy were, but they're still Synergy's pieces. As a sextet, we have been able to play music that isn't often played and to play it our way.'

Claire Edwardes, Richard Gleeson, Kevin Man, Luke McAvenna and Timothy Paillas complete the sextet. As with any new ensemble, choosing a name was important and Guy found inspiration in the obvious source – the Sydney Spring Festival. 'I was sitting at home one afternoon and I knew that there already was a Spring Ensemble. I was almost going to be too cute and call the group Spring-a-Leak! Sprung Out was

also a possibility at one point, but then I thought "Bugger it, it'll just be Sprung" and thankfully it stuck. For me and the rest of the guys, the name still goes back to what started it off for us.'

For such a young group, Sprung Percussion has already done its fair share of collaborating with Australian composers. Apart from the three commissioned works it performed at the 1997 debut concert, mem-

bers of the group were artists-in-residence at the 1998 Spring Academy of New Music (held at the University of Sydney) presenting workshops and open rehearsals which featured music submitted by young composers from all around the country.

This fruitful association with composers is something which the group is keen to maintain. 'With Australian composers, we try to workshop their pieces with them.'



Sprung Percussion (from l to r): Guy du Blêt, Claire Edwardes, Timothy Paillas, Richard Gleeson, Luke McAvenna.

they come along to rehearsal and we offer advice,' Gleeson explains, 'even though there's been some stuff in the past that's been unplayable. When the composer is playing the score through on a computer, it's possible to get from one instrument to another in a short amount of time, but in reality, working out the choreography plays a major part.'

Perhaps the greatest challenge in choreography facing the group this year is the geographical distance of the individual players. Guy du Blêt is currently working as a section soloist with the State Orchestra of Victoria, Kevin Man has recently accepted a percussion position with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, and Claire Edwardes is undertaking postgraduate studies at the Rotterdam Conservatorium. Yet Guy assured me that Sprung Percussion will once again perform in the Sydney Spring Festival and decisions are already being made about repertoire.

One of the works the ensemble performed at their first Sydney Spring appearance was *153 Infinities* by Ian Shanahan. Originally composed for piano with percussion trio, Sprung disentangled the three percussion parts and performed them with all six players. Renowned for his intricate and complex music, Shanahan is re-writing the parts for *153 Infinities* to include six percussionists, and is already planning another work for Sprung Percussion, this time with only one instrument per player.

I asked Ian what was the attraction for composers to write for percussion instruments. 'You could characterise the 19th century as the time when the piano got defined as the archetypal European instrument. Now, it is the age of percussion. To put it simply, I like the complex, interesting noise they make, but also to my ears, percussion has a very modern sound to it, even though percussion instruments are some of the oldest ones around. In concert, it's very physical, very engaging to watch, given that we live in a kind of visual culture.'

'Also people tend to be really enthusiastic about percussion as their repertoire is being created by contemporary composers. With a string quartet, there's already a massive repertoire for it and players can be a little bit blasé about modern composers, since they already have their Beethoven and their Bartók. Whereas because the composers of today are creating the whole corpus of repertoire for percussion, there tends to be more of a rapport.'

The players agree that the percussion sound has a lot of potential for composers as an ideal medium for creating their indi-

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vidual voice, and that there are still many sounds and instruments which need exploring. Daryl Pratt, Chair of the Percussion Unit at the Sydney Conservatorium, also feels that while several benchmark works for this genre have already been composed, the majority is still yet to come. 'The percussion ensemble is still a very young art form in the West. There's really only about half a century's worth of repertoire for Western percussion instruments, so it's going to take a long time for repertoire to develop.'

When choosing repertoire other than commissioned works, the biggest consideration is the instrumentation requirements, particularly for longer concerts. While it is important to present a program with variety and balance, the logistical matter of effectively assembling various set-ups is also significant. At the opening of The Studio in the Sydney Opera House in March this year, one of the works Sprung Percussion performed (Kazimierz Serocki's *Continuum*) required a staggering 123 different instruments divided among six players.

'With setting up for a live concert,' says Gleeson, 'by the time you get to play, you're exhausted. The great thing about The Studio opening concert was that we could get in there a couple of days earlier and set up. The only problem was that it was still being built, so on the first day we were contending with jack-hammers and chain-saws,

and we came back the next day to find half an inch of sawdust on our instruments.'

Naturally, with so many instruments on stage and very little room to move, working out the motions for each particular work is another consideration, as Gleeson explains. 'Knowing when and how to move around the instruments with the minimum of fuss, without knocking over too many things in the process and not attracting too much attention is probably one of the most difficult parts of learning percussion.'

Yet what would his advice be for anxious parents whose children are set on learning the drums? 'People often associate percussion with making a lot of noise when practising. But I can guarantee you that a beginner percussionist will make far less noise than a beginner trumpet player, a beginner violin player, or a beginner anything, because the screeching away that you get from those instruments is terrible!'

Or as Guy du Blêt simply puts it, 'Percussion is just one fun thing after another. It never ends, I wouldn't do anything else in the world.'

Katarina Krosiakova is a pianist who has performed with Sprung Percussion.

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